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ABSTRACT

With a view toward the future, this paper raises and begins to answer the following four questions about education in tomorrow's world. First, will the "basics" as presently defined continue to be the basics, and if so, is society ready to support them? Second, are there new basics which must be integrated into school curricula, and, if so, what are they? Third, how can citizens be certain that ever increasing bodies of knowledge can be made available to the curious minds of children? Fourth, are Americans ready to commit themselves through concerted action to the principle that education is a basic human right? The article ends with the open question: Are Americans, as a nation, ready to pay the price for excellence that the future demands? (RH)

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# "AHEAD" TO BASICS

By: Ursula Schwerin, President
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My title differs in just one word from the cry we hear so frequently these days -- "Back to Basics" -- yet, it is a plea that signals an important change in both emphasis and direction. It is a challenge to dream, to think creatively, and to look ahead to the future as we, a complex society, attempt to impart to our children those skills which will assist them in controlling their educational destinies in tomorrow's world.

Yesterday's "good old days" create a nostalgia for something we like to remember fondly, something which may or may not be worthy of our longing, but something which certainly must be rethought if today's and tomorrow's young people are to be served well.

Experience has taught us that, in recorded educational history, complex reading, writing and mathematical skills have been the foundations on which to build meaningful educational experiences in all disciplines. It might even be postulated that those who perfect these skills into sophisticated and intricate patterns will be the ones to exert ultimate political and economic influence. Be that as it may, it is time that the education establishment, together with society as a whole, ask some pertinent questions if American children are to hold their own in the



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world's emerging economic and social patterns which no longer recognize geographic or language boundaries.

- Will the "basics" as we know them continue to be the basics and if so, is society ready to support them?
- Are there new basics which must be integrated into school curricula and if so, what are they?
- How can we assure ourselves that ever increasing bodies of knowledge can be made available to the curious mind of a child?
- Are we ready to commit ourselves through concerted action to the principle that "education is a basic human right?"

The questions, of course, are much easier to ask than to answer, but we must begin the difficult process of examination without delay. And while I do not presume to know the "correct" answers, I do have a strong sense of the direction we must take. Those are the thoughts I would like to share with you.

There is no doubt in my mind that complex oral and written communication as well as computational skills remain essential basic requirements of a productive and satisfying existence which allows individuals to control their intellectual development. For more than a generation we have watched school systems attempting to cope with curriculum revisions in order to stem the rapid loss of these basic skills, teachers attempting to teach students who have become so passive that they lack the motivation to participate actively in determining their educational destinies, and parents seeking to place blame on "the system" while doing little or nothing themselves to support the efforts of teachers.

Any text on the theories of education tells us that schools will teach and children will learn only that which finds support in the larger society. Where is that support for the "basics" as we have known them? It will not exist just because we pay lip service to it--it only will if children are encouraged and motivated to practice in the remaining hours of the day that which teachers attempt to impart in class. It's more than "homework". It's making a potential skill part of the experience of living.

However, today's family activity patterns mitigate against such encouragement or motivation for the child. Involved are diverse work schedules and scarcity of leisure time, lack of adult supervision, problems of fatigue, questions of patience and available time to spend with one another--and finally, the ubiquitous T.V. set, our universal pacifier and escape mechanism that dominates the family scene. Consider the fact that today's teacher is also a family member, subject to similar stresses and limitations and the parameters which motivated my first two questions are clearly drawn. Does this society wish to make the necessary commitment to basics? If it does, it must help this generation of "latchkey" children to find adult role models whose patterns of daily living will embrace them in a meaningful sense rather than isolate them.

The question of "new basics" is not something to be considered in isolation from the above, nor can it be viewed as an abstraction for the future--it constitutes one of our most concrete and immediate concerns. Computer literacy, for instance, relates not only to basic computational skills,

but involves logic, precision, organizational and problem solving skills, and notions of symbolic language. Pupil readiness and levels of desired competency must serve as determinators for timely curriculum inclusion. It is clear, however, that the early elementary school years must be utilized fully, if computer competency is to be achieved by high school and college students at their particular levels.

Perhaps equally important is the question of language skills. Can we really continue to educate children with the notion that the English language alone will provide them with a competitive edge in the world market place? We persist in struggling with the value of bilingual education for the foreign born in the United States--instead, let us, as a matter of principle, forever dispel the notion that monolingual education for the American born child or for any child can ever again be adequate preparation for the future. International cooperation and constructive human interactions demand bilingual and trilingual skills that should become integral to any school curriculum anywhere in the world.

Beyond these examples, to contemplate anything but the earliest possible inclusion into curriculum of sound, vigorous education in the natural sciences would merely confirm that this nation is still not prepared to address the needs of an era of science and technology with intellectual rigor. Perhaps even more important is the recognition and implicit difficulty of dealing with rapidly increasing bodies of knowledge in the sciences.

It seems to me that an entirely different approach to learning must be explored if we wish children to experience more than meaningless memorization of a myriad of facts, figures, formulas and theorems.

Should the teaching-learning transaction perhaps be based on a philosophy of inquiry in which students function as active protagonists of their own educational future? Inquiry stresses skills of thinking, analysis, and problem solving as well as the postulation of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Inquiry implies a process of close examination of data and issues in a quest for information, accuracy and truth. Would students not be served well by mastery of such processes and ideas in their early years of schooling so that they themselves can apply a rational and logical approach to the study of otherwise insurmountable bodies of scientific subject matter?

Second and third graders' intellectual curiosity and imagination can easily be stimulated. Their everyday experiences at home and at play contain all the basic elements of the natural sciences. Why not use the growth and change phenomena of their own bodies to teach scientific principles? Relating food preparation, nutritional values and digestion will establish natural linkages and interactions of the diverse biological, physical and chemical elements. Doesn't ball playing in its many forms provide the necessary components to clarify some of the secrets of physics? None of the above should be viewed as a game, however. Adults, whether teachers or parents, must relinquish their own fears of the study of sciences. All too

easily do they transmit their own anxieties to children and thus tend to design exercises in game form without making appropriate associations with formal scientific rigor. They definitely underestimate the child's capabilities. Children urgently need to develop processes of critical thinking and analysis, without which effective problem solving approaches will not be developed.

Finally, can we be equally rational in providing sound educational opportunities for all children, at all levels in all settings? Even if our intentions have been good in the past, little progress has been made in addressing the intellectual potential of each child realistically. The educational process does not exist in isolation from the total physical, emotional, and social environment in which the child lives. External influences may tip the scales of success for or against each youngster depending on the support structure society provides. If we wish to do more than pay lip service to the maxim that education is a basic human right, we must search for real solutions now.

Learned individuals and national commissions speak to us of rising educational mediocrity, of unmet competitive challenges and of "A Nation at Risk"....Now is the time to move "Ahead to Basics" so that the children of today will indeed be able to face the challenges of tomorrow.

Are we, as a nation, ready to pay the price of excellence that the future demands?

July 1983